

RECORD OF AN ABORIGINAL SHIELD LISTED AS TASMANIAN  
AND A BOOMERANG FOUND NEAR EAST DEVONPORT,  
TASMANIA

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PLATES VI and VII

ABSTRACT

Our knowledge of the customs of the Aborigines of Tasmania is based almost exclusively on the observations recorded by contemporary writers. This information is relatively scanty. Accordingly, at this stage, it seems highly desirable to place on record any information that may conceivably have a bearing, however remote, on the problem of these extinct people, as regards both their own culture, and the possible influence of alien cultures on them. The present paper deals with a shield in the Museum collections listed as Tasmanian and a boomerang from near East Devonport, North West Coast, Tasmania.

INTRODUCTION

There are in the Museum collections a shield, donated in 1887, and listed as Tasmanian, and a boomerang turned up by a ploughshare near East Devonport at the end of 1851. In view of their interest they are here described, and their possible origins discussed.

ABORIGINAL SHIELD LISTED AS TASMANIAN

(PLATE VI)

DESCRIPTION

The shield is three-sided, with the handle cut out of the solid, the excavated area being 9.3 cm. wide and 2.8 cm. deep.

The face, which is 87.6 cm. long and 12.5 cm. wide at the middle, is flat transversely and longitudinally convex. When the shield is placed face down, the mid-points of the ends are approximately 2.0 cm. and 2.6 cm. from a flat surface. In section it is approximately triangular. The equal hinder sides at the middle are two-thirds of the face and are for most of their length slightly concave. When the shield is resting on the handle on a flat surface, the mid-points of the ends are approximately 3.5 cm. and 4.6 cm. above the flat surface. The specimen weighs 1.55 kg. (3 lbs 7 oz.).

The face is ornamented with incised lines in concentric diamond, with half diamond and chevron field, there being three complete diamonds, the outer lines of which are chevroned.

The inner grooves of the three main concentric diamonds and the outer ones of the half diamonds retain abundant traces of a white material, probably pipeclay, with which they were apparently originally filled. Under a lens, in the outer grooves of the concentric diamonds are seen particles of a reddish dye, probably red-ochre.

The general workmanship is good.

The shield is made of a light wood, belonging to a species of *Acacia*, probably *Acacia implexa* Bentham, which is found in Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland, and Tasmania (North Eastern and North Western districts).

This shield is of a type characteristic of South Eastern Australia, being the form commonly called Mulga, and also Mulgon, by the tribes of the lower Murray, and Marr-aga by the Gippsland natives.

#### HISTORY

Pasted on the back of the shield is a label, in unknown handwriting, which reads, 'Tasmanian Aboriginal Shield/Presented by/J. F. Hobkirk Esq./Sept. '87.'

The present Museum label, in the handwriting of the late H. H. Scott, Curator, 1887-1938, states, 'When the Tasmanian Natives were dying out, the Government induced some Victorian Blacks to come and settle among them. This Victorian Shield was obtained from Flinders Island, the above recorded fact no doubt accounting for its being there. Given by Mr J. F. Hobkirk, Sept., 1887.'

It is not known whether the late H. H. Scott's reference to Flinders Island is based on some now inaccessible source of information (*c.g.*, by conversation with the donor), or whether it represents nothing more than a surmise regarding the specimen's possible origin. The date on the original label does not necessarily convey any information as to when the shield was acquired by the donor, since the year 1887 was that of the foundation of this institution.

The donor of the specimen, Mr John Francis Hobkirk, came to Tasmania as a young man, landing in Launceston on 2nd February, 1852. He subsequently became one of Launceston's most prominent legal practitioners. He died in Launceston on 10th September, 1912 at the age of 84.

The possible significance of this specimen is discussed under a separate heading.

### BOOMERANG FOUND NEAR EAST DEVONPORT

(PLATE VII)

#### DESCRIPTION

The outline of the boomerang is approximately that of an arc subtended by a chord 48.9 cm. long and 16.4 cm. high measured to the outer margin. The main axis of the specimen exhibits near the middle a distinct, somewhat S-shaped twist. At the middle the width is 4.9 cm., the thickness 1.4 cm.

The wood is a Musk, probably *Olearia argophylla* F. v. M., the specimen possibly being made from the root. This species is a small tree of 20-30 feet, very common in damp forests, found in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, and Tasmania.

The boomerang is of a common and widely distributed type, and is not characteristic of any restricted region.

Its present color is greyed yellow ochre.

## HISTORY

The following narrative is the history of the boomerang, as told by the present owner, Mr C. E. W. Oldaker.

A paragraph in *The Examiner*, Launceston, on 25th February, 1851 records the wreck, on the Hebe Reef, at the entrance to the River Tamar, of the ship *Phillip Oakden*, carrying, besides cargo, 10 passengers, all of whom were saved. Among these were four people by the name of Oldaker, Mr C. E. W. Oldaker's grandfather and grandmother, and their two children, a boy and a girl. The grandfather, Charles Ford Oldaker, and his family soon after settled near East Devonport, then known as Torquay, on an estate he called *Avondale*. As was the custom in those days, he rented out, for clearing, a plot of virgin land to a 'Coeky' farmer named Vincent, and it was towards the end of 1851, during Vineent's occupation, that ploughing, which was being carried out in a heavily timbered valley, brought to light the boomerang. It is stated that the specimen when found was of a greyish color—it is now greyed yellow ochre—and it has been suggested that this fact renders it doubtful whether it was actually turned up by the ploughshare, or merely disturbed by it.

The locality of the discovery is situated about a mile and a half due east from Victoria Bridge crossing the Mersey River at Devonport, and two and a half or three miles back from (south of) the sea coast. The soil here is of the red basaltic type common on the North West Coast.

After finding the boomerang, Vineent related the circumstances of its discovery to Charles Ford Oldaker, and gave the specimen to him. Mr Charles Ford Oldaker subsequently handed it to his son, Francis Oldaker, and his daughter-in-law, Maria Anne Oldaker. Maria Anne Oldaker, now of Victoria, in her 83rd year, and possessing a remarkably good memory, related in turn its history to the present owner, her son, Mr Charles Edmund Wells Oldaker.

## DISCUSSION

## I. SHIELD

## USE OF SHIELDS BY THE TASMANIANS

It is the generally accepted opinion that the Tasmanian did not make or use a shield. This view is adopted by practically all authoritative writers on our Aborigines.

Thus, H. Ling Roth (1899, p. 68) says, 'It is very remarkable that the Tasmanians, who developed in their last struggle for life and liberty such remarkable warlike powers, should originally have been armed only with the very crudest weapons. We are distinctly told that these people had neither throwing-sticks (wommeras) nor boomerangs (Jeffreys, p. 126; Breton, p. 355; Davies, p. 419; Wentworth, p. 115). According to Marion (p. 28): "The men were all armed with pointed sticks, and some stones which appeared to us to have cutting edges, similar to the iron one of hatchets", while Calder, (*J.A.I.*, p. 21) says: "When his (the Tasmanian's) other weapons failed him, he fought with stones, and even with these was a formidable opponent." One authority (Meredith, *Papers Roy. Soc. Tasm.*, Aug., 1873) says they had no shields. But Thirkell (*ibid.*) [1873 (1874), p. 28] says, "They used a shield made of a flat piece of wood." The shield would probably have been introduced by the Sydney Aborigines in later times. Their weapons were thus limited to the spear, waddy, and stones.'

Elsewhere (p. 69) H. Ling Roth states, 'Thirkell speaks of the spears being jagged at the sharp end (*Papers Roy. Soc. Tasm.*, Aug., 1873), and in reference to this statement we find (*ibid.*) [discussion of Meredith's statement], "In the eastern districts, with which Meredith was familiar, the blacks never jagged their spears, nor did they make use of a shield. The jagged spears and shields would therefore appear to have been used more particularly by the northern tribes, which were specially referred to by Thirkell\*.'" [\*Footnote. 'It is quite possible jagged spears may have been introduced from Australia.']

#### POSSIBLE ORIGIN OF THE SPECIMEN

(a) If the shield were obtained on Flinders Island, as suggested in the explanatory Museum label written by the late H. H. Scott, it could have been secured by a Tasmanian who had been transported there. However, the more likely explanation would be that it was obtained from an Australian Native on Flinders Island, since it is known that when the Tasmanians were dying out, the Government induced some of the Australians to come to the Island and settle among them.

(b) The specimen could have been made by an Australian aboriginal in Australia, and subsequently lost in Tasmania. There are records of a number of Australians being brought to Tasmania: furthermore, Wunderly (1938) is of the opinion that some Australians reached the West Coast, where they mated with some of the Tasmanians of the West Coast Tribe.

(c) The shield could have been made by an Australian in Tasmania, as it is made of a wood found in Tasmania (and also on the Mainland).

(d) It is possible that it could have been brought from Australia to Tasmania by one of the early settlers.

(e) If the shield were obtained, as the original label states, in Tasmania, it could have been made by a Tasmanian under Australian guidance, or by a Tasmanian without aid. The wood, as mentioned, is found in Tasmania; and as all the evidence we have is the original label, reading 'Tasmanian Aboriginal Shield', the specimen may be Tasmanian. But against this we have the fact that at the period the shield was donated people were not as careful in discriminating between Tasmanian and Australian material as they might have been.

(f) The shield could have been made by a Tasmanian, in Tasmania, after outside contact and his chance return to his Island. It was possible for him after the advent of the Europeans to have visited Australia. It is known that sealers and whalers were in the habit of abducting and buying the Tasmanian women.

#### II. BOOMERANG

##### USE OF THE BOOMERANG BY THE TASMANIANS

It is the generally received opinion that the boomerang, like the shield, was unknown to the Tasmanian, at any rate until he came under Australian influence.

All accounts state that he did not use it. H. Ling Roth (1899, p. 68) observes, 'We are distinctly told that these people had neither throwing-sticks (wommeras) nor boomerangs (Jeffreys, p. 126; Breton, p. 255; Davies, p. 419; Wentworth, p. 115).'

H. Ling Roth (p. 82) again states, 'No account says anything of a boomerang, and West states they had no throwing-sticks (II, p. 84).'

In the *Illustrated Australian Encyclopaedia* 1925, under the heading *Musquito* (p. 171), we find the following statement, 'he introduced among the shy and comparatively inoffensive Tasmanian natives the aggressiveness and ferocity of the mainland tribes; he also introduced the boomerang (which was not a Tasmanian weapon), but it does not seem that he persuaded his new companions to adopt it.'

#### POSSIBLE ORIGIN OF THE SPECIMEN

(a) It may, or may not, be of some significance that the boomerang was found only 9 or 10 miles from the place where the Tasmanian natives of the Big River Tribe killed Captain Bartholomew Boyle Thomas, and his Overseer, James Parker, in 1831. This tribe, with its headquarters at 'the valley of the Derwent—with its tributaries Ouse (formerly Big River), Clyde, and Shannon—and the elevated plateau of the Lake Country' (Walker, 1897, p. 183), is known to have roamed widely, and it is possible that they may have come into contact with some of the introduced Australian Blacks, from whom they may have acquired the weapon. It is of interest to note that Parker's land adjoined that of *Avondale*, the estate of Charles Ford Oldaker, where the boomerang was found.

(b) The boomerang may have been made by a Tasmanian under Australian guidance. In the passage from the *Australian Encyclopaedia* already cited it is, however, definitely stated that *Musquito*, at any rate, failed to persuade the Tasmanian to adopt the use of the weapon.

(c) The specimen could have been dropped by a settler. Considering the curious circumstances of discovery, particularly the early date, it is difficult to understand how this could have happened.

(d) As with the shield, so in the case of the boomerang, the implement could have been made by a Tasmanian on his return after outside contact.

(e) The boomerang may have been brought to Tasmania by Australian Blacks who may have visited the Island either before or after the advent of Europeans, and may have mated with the Tasmanians. Wunderly (1938, p. 124) speaking of the West Coast Tribe states, 'The conclusion has been reached that the weighing of all the evidence strongly suggests that this tribe contained some members who were Tasmanian full-bloods, some Tasmanian-Australian mixed-bloods, and a few Australian full-bloods.'

(f) The possibility that the boomerang is a true product of uninfluenced Tasmanian culture remains to be considered. The fact that it was found on virgin land during the early years of the colony, is certainly curious. Difficult as it is, in view of the received opinion on the subject, to accept this explanation, it is certainly true that all other explanations also offer difficulties.

As various items of a type generally regarded as belonging to the Australian, or some other non-Tasmanian culture are found in Tasmania from time to time, it is thought worth while recording these two, in the hope that others may come to hand, and some of the mystery associated with their occurrence be made clear.

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## PLATE VI

### ABORIGINAL SHIELD LISTED AS TASMANIAN

Original label pasted on specimen (Q.V.M. Reg. No. 1257) reads, 'Tasmanian Aboriginal Shield Presented by J. F. Hobkirk, Esq., Sept. '87'. Total length 87.6 c.m.

Fig. 1.—General view of face of shield.

Fig. 2.—General view of back, slightly tilted. Note original pasted-on label.

(Photograph by J. Glennie)

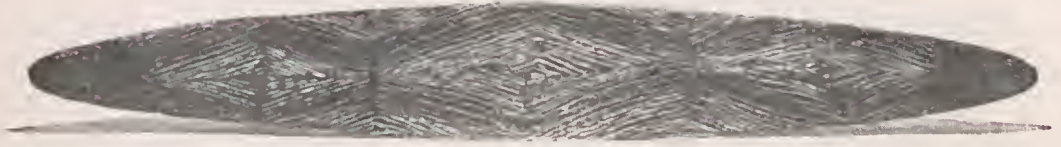
## PLATE VII

### BOOMERANG FOUND AT EAST DEVONPORT, NORTH WESTERN TASMANIA

Specimen (Q.V.M. Reg. No. L.I. 1941. 11) found by Mr Vineent at *Avondale*, near East Devonport, during ploughing operations, in 1851. Direct length from tip to tip 48.9 c.m.

(Photograph by J. Glennie)

PLATE VI



➤ FIG. 1.



FIG. 2.

PLATE VII

